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Enhancing leadership skills with action learning: a promising way to improve the effectiveness of leadership development

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Action learning (AL) was invented and first implemented by Revans (1998) during the Second World War in Great Britain. It was a new and effective team problem-solving methodology based on a questioning process with a small group. Only later, toward the latter part of the twentieth century were the learning benefits of this collaborative reflection method more widely recognized.

One of its main advocates is Marquardt (2004). He refined this method with a special emphasis on its learning benefits through applying a model of structured sessions. His other additional component, and in contrast to Revans' antipathy toward the use of facilitators or coaches, has been the introduction of a specially trained coach.

This version of AL has grown worldwide for about ten years with the World Institute for Action Learning international network. It appears currently as a quite interesting response to the challenge of many organizations that need to improve the leadership skills of their managers within the constraints of less time and less money to become more efficient and more competitive.

Many leadership skills required currently can be enhanced with this version of AL (Marquardt, 2014) such as capabilities to:

- quickly solve real complex problems;
- create a safe and collaborative team reflection atmosphere;
- establish good relationships and better cohesion between the team members;
- ask insightful questions;
- listen carefully to each person;
- give importance to each participant's contribution;
- foster individual and team creativity;
- demonstrate emotional intelligence in exchanges;
- engage people to the organization strategy;
- increase the energy of the group; and
- make participants feel responsible for the group reflection outcome.

This method of collaborative reflection within a small group is characterized not only by its problem-solving capacities (short term benefits) but also by its learning advantages at the individual level (leadership skills), at the team level (team building and learning) and at the organizational level (medium-/long-term benefits). In this short article, we will only focus on the development of leadership skills.

Action Learning contributes to the development of participant leadership skills primarily through its specific questions-based dialogue.

How can action learning contribute to leadership skill development?

AL contributes to the development of participant leadership skills primarily through its specific questions-based dialogue. The AL coach plays a major role in the learning process of each participant and of the team. As noticed by Marquardt (2004), this method of leadership skills learning ensures that the four main success conditions of learning are fulfilled:

1. importance to the person;
2. opportunity to practice;
3. feedback from others; and
4. self-reflection.

In practice, this version of AL gathers a small group or a team (from four to eight participants) for short sessions of about 90 min divided into four phases that are facilitated by the coach. To develop the leadership skills of the participants, and before starting the session about solving the presented problem or issue, the AL coach asks each team member to identify the leadership skill that they want to work on during the session. For each participant, the chosen leadership skill is put on a flipchart so everyone can see and remind themselves who is working on which skill. At the end of the session, the coach asks each participant to reflect on how they demonstrated their chosen skill. The other group members also give positive examples to each other; no critical or negative comments are allowed as an appreciative enquiry spirit is required by this method. The coach also makes a positive learning-oriented comment in the final debriefing phase.

During the session, the coach intervenes with questions whenever they see an opportunity for a team member to develop their chosen leadership skill or to share relevant experience or specific knowledge. In addition, when there are several sessions focused on the same problem or issue, the AL coach asks the participants to reflect on:

- how they have practiced their leadership skills back in the organization;
- the impact on their work and teams; and
- what they have learned further about the particular leadership skill.

The coach also acts as a leadership role model for participants by demonstrating good listening and questioning skills, which are recognized as features of a "great leader" (Marquardt, 2014).

How can action learning enhance the leadership skills of managers and facilitate the leadership learning process of management students?

Managers

Many organizations currently realize that leadership development programs are necessary to enhance their managers's leadership competencies and especially their interpersonal and social competencies. Organizations have used AL for some decades to improve their effectiveness to change their management culture and/or to build more learning-oriented organizations (Pedler, 1996).

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The AL approach presented here may provide benefits in that it takes less time and can reduce the costs of a more mainstream program. It has been used to develop leaders for more than fifteen years by many companies worldwide, as well as small- and medium-sized enterprises, public/government and non-profit organizations.

Management students

Quite often qualified graduates from top business schools demonstrate poor leadership competencies, especially at the interpersonal and team levels (Mintzberg, 2004).

An emerging trend worldwide among management education institutions is to use more AL approaches to develop the soft skills of the students. There is a growing requirement to better prepare them for the challenges of their future people management and leadership responsibilities.

So far, few have adopted and are really using forms of AL in their curriculum, although their number is increasing. Some examples we can quote are BSN in The Netherlands and South Africa, Team Academy in Finland and other countries, the MIT and the University of Washington in the USA, the Rikkyo University in Japan, Asia Business School in Malaysia and La Rochelle Business School in France.

From our field experience over some years with business school students, we have evidence of the effectiveness of this form of AL's questioning process to develop leadership skills.

Conclusion

Although AL originated from empirical work (Revans, 1998) and not a theory, over the years, its methodology has been validated by all the related social and human behavior sciences. The AL methodology presented here, appears as an alternative and effective method for leadership skills development both for managers and for management students. It proposes a learning model that opens up opportunities for new leadership education programs.

Keywords:
Leadership development, Action learning, Coaching

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